

Bingo Night by **theamiableanachronism**

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Summary: El takes Mike to Bingo Night. Chaos ensues.

Bingo Night

He had to be in the middle of a nightmare.

He was standing in the middle of the Hawkins Community Center surrounded by senior citizens.

And it was Bingo Night.

It was a veritable sea of walkers and canes and matching sweatsuits, all reeking of stale perfume.

Or at least what he hoped was perfume.

It was like every single Thanksgiving at his grandparents' condominium times a thousand. He didn't know any of these people, so the chances were relatively slim that any of them would try to pinch his cheek, but you never could tell with old people, so his cheek was already stinging in anticipation.

He looked at El, standing completely unfazed at his side. She was the whole reason he was here at all. Three weeks earlier, she'd come here with Flo from the police station when Hopper had had to work late. Flo brought her to Bingo Night so she wouldn't have to wait around the station with nothing to do except listen to Hopper swear at Callahan. Flo bought an extra board for El and they played Bingo until Hopper came to take El home.

The strangest thing about all of it was that El had actually loved it.

That night, she'd called Mike the minute she got home and told him all about it, gushing about how much fun it was, how she was going to go back next week with Flo to try and win the jackpot, and how she and Mike should go together the week after that.

He couldn't believe his ears at first: El? His El? Playing Bingo with senior citizens? And actually liking it?

Bingo was a game for old people.

Lonely, old, and bored people.

But of course he'd said yes when El asked him to come. Why? Because it was El.

And any time spent with El was always better than no time.

So here he was, wondering how on Earth she could be looking so excited about a bunch of ping-pong balls rolling around in a cage.

Expertly, she made her way through the crowd, pulling Mike along behind her. He would have been apologizing all over himself for every elbow he brushed, worrying his inherent clumsiness would make somebody fall over and break a hip. He didn't know if he could live with knowing he was the reason someone got put in a nursing home.

But El didn't seem to be worried. Faster than he'd expected, they were zeroing in on a table and he was helping her push her chair in, the metal creaking and scraping against the floor.

But El wasn't bothered by this either. By the time Mike sat down, she'd scooted to the edge of her chair, giving herself the added height to reach across the table and start laying out the Bingo Boards and bags of green plastic tokens they'd bought when they came in. Once everything was arranged to her satisfaction, she clasped her hands in her lap and turned to Mike.

"Do you remember the rules?"

Mike nodded. "Yeah, sure," he said, reciting the rules she'd told him at least twenty times over the past week, including twice on the car ride over (which may have been his fault, since he pretended to have forgotten when she asked him the first time). "You listen for the guy to call the numbers and then you put the little disk on the corresponding number. Got it."

"And if they all match—"

"You yell out 'bingo', yeah, I know, El," Mike grinned. She had a tiny line between her eyebrows, one of which shot up.

"Are you sure?"

Mike sighed. It was just a game. And a really easy game too. Of course he was sure. "Yes, I'm sure."

El watched him for a moment longer, then nodded and turned so that she was facing the stage at the front of the room, where a spry and smiley old man in a gaudy Hawaiian shirt was lowering himself into a chair at a table where a giant black cage full of hundreds of white ping-pong balls was waiting. An old woman in a vest stood next to the table, presumably to turn the crank that extended from the cage. The smiley man smiled at her and pulled a small microphone on a stand up to his mouth. He started to speak into it and an ear-piercing squeal of feedback echoed off the walls, drowning out his words. Mike and El clapped their hands over their ears, wincing. The man hunched his shoulders with a sheepish smile and pulled a few inches away from the microphone. The feedback faded and he grinned.

"All right, goooooood evening folks! My name's Jake Goldrich, who's ready for another round of Bingo?"

Easy game.

He'd thought it was an easy game.

How could it be difficult? You just put pieces of plastic on a piece of cardboard.

But Mike was losing. And badly.

He kept sneaking looks at El, waiting for signs that she was annoyed, or worse, pitying him for not being able to cover even one square, when she'd covered at least half of every one of her boards every round.

But there hadn't been one eye roll, not one derisive smile, not even a frown.

She looked like she was having the time of her life. She was leaning so far forward, her chair had tipped forward, the rubber soles of her sneakers the only thing keeping the chair from sliding out from beneath her and sending her crashing to the waxed hardwood floor. Her eyes were bright and any disappointment at not having one of

the numbers was quickly replaced by triumph that she had the next one. His heart squeezed.

It was the last round of the night, a blackout round, where every single square had to be covered.

Fat chance he'd get that.

He hadn't expected his ego to take such a blow over a game for old people, but it was severely wounded. It didn't help that the whole thing was a game of chance. And it was a game of chance you couldn't even be good at, like poker, where if you bluffed hard enough, you could beat the odds.

But Mike wasn't good at poker either. His face always gave everything away. Here, his face didn't even matter.

The ping-pong balls decided everything.

"O-17," Jake Goldrich called. The woman started turning the cage again and the clatter of the ping-pong balls started up again, the sound getting on every last one of Mike's nerves. He tapped one of his plastic tokens against the tabletop in a frenetic rhythm, resisting the urge to run up to the stage and see if this game really was as rigged as it felt. He squinted at Goldrich, trying to see if the pockets of his stupid Hawaiian shirt were bulging with ping-pong balls that he'd palmed away for his own nefarious purposes.

But the shirt had no pockets and there were no hidden ping-pong balls. Mike just had terrible luck.

He felt El suddenly cover his tapping hand with hers. He stopped and looked into her concerned face.

"Are you ok, Mike?"

He closed his fist around the token and smiled in what he hoped was a nonchalant expression.

"Yeah, sure, I'm fine, El."

She squinted suspiciously and he forced his smile to grow wider,

making it feel like the muscles around his lips were tearing apart.

"I'm having a great time. This is really fun, El."

That had done it. It was too big of a bluff.

She shook her head. "You're not having a good time."

His heart dropped. El always knew. "No no, really!" he protested. He was not going to spoil this for her just because he had a competitive streak and an easily bruised ego. He covered her hand with his. "I'm having a great time, El," he repeated, smiling again for good measure, hoping to reassure her into looking less suspicious. It didn't work.

She set her jaw and turned away, narrowing her eyes at the stage.

From the back of the room, somebody yelled "Bingo!" and Mike's heart sank. El turned and frowned at the fancily-dressed grandma with gold earrings and too much magenta lipstick in the back of the room who was preening as she presented her card like it was a one hundred dollar bill.

A gangly teenager wearing a visor and vest like the woman onstage went to the woman's table and scanned her card. After a moment, he looked at Goldrich and shook his head, shrugging apologetically at the woman, who sniffed haughtily.

El turned to Mike and in unison, they rolled their eyes.

"Game's still on, folks," Goldrich said with another shiny grin. He pulled another ball out of the cage. "B-45."

Mike looked down at his card and shrugged, almost wanting to laugh. Had he really expected to have that one?

He looked over at El's card. She, of course, had it, but she was staring at the stage and Goldrich as he pulled another ball out of the cage. Just as he was getting a good look at it, it leapt out of his fingers.

Startled, he chuckled, a faint "Whoops!" carrying over the sound system. He reached into the cage for another, and it happened again. A titter ran through the crowd and he leaned into the microphone.

"Just call me butterfingers, folks!" He chuckled and reached for another ball, using his other hand to secure his hold on it once he'd pulled it out of the cage. But just as he opened his mouth to read it, his face contorted and he sneezed, the force of it causing him to drop the ball. Once he'd recovered, he looked incredulously at the woman with the crank, but what could she do except shrug?

Mike, on the other hand, turned to El, whose fists were clenched in concentration.

"El, what are you doing?" Mike whispered. She ignored him and Goldrich dropped three more balls.

"Sorry, folks," he said, just the slightest hint of nervousness starting to show under the veneer of his smile.

"El—"

"Shh," she said through tight lips.

More and more ping-pong balls were flying through the air, tiny white dots zooming in every direction but the man's hand. Every second that passed, Goldrich grew more and more flustered, and Mike was convinced he was going to crack a rib from keeping his laughter all bottled up.

The woman turning the crank finally held up her hand and reached into the cage herself, firmly handing a ball to the man, but it slipped out of her fingers before it could fall into his palm. She jerked back in surprise. The teenage aide appeared onstage and they both looked to him helplessly. He reached into the cage, waving his hand frantically like a kid trying to scoop the last cookie out of the cookie jar. He pulled one out triumphantly but it zoomed out of his fingers so fast, it ricocheted off the east wall and nearly clocked a lady sitting in the front row. El's shoulders hunched as if she was the one who'd been hit and Mike quickly placed a comforting hand on her shoulder, smiling reassuringly when she looked at him guiltily out the corner of her eye. She relaxed and unclenched her fists, a whoop from the stage telling them the teenager had finally gotten his fingers on a ping-pong ball. El and Mike broke eye contact and watched him hand it to Goldrich.

"Folks," Goldrich said, leaning into the microphone and holding the ping-pong ball up like it was a trophy. "I've been doing this gig for going on forty years now, and I can safely say we've never had anything happen like this before. Hope you folks got a chuckle out of it. You all right there, Fran?" The lady who'd narrowly missed getting hit with the ping-pong ball nodded and chuckled. A relieved smile crossed El's features and Mike gave her shoulder a final squeeze before letting his hand rest on the back of her chair. Satisfied with Fran's response, Goldrich announced with great fanfare, "Here's the last number of the night: G-77."

For a moment, there was silence. Mike didn't even bother checking his card or El's. Then, an old woman in a huge red hat at a table just to the left of the stage shouted "BINGO!"

The teenager jumped off the stage and came to a stop at the lady's table, where she was chattering excitedly to the other ladies at her table, all wearing equally outlandish hats.

"What's she got, Randy?" Goldrich asked.

The teen took a deep breath then rattled off, "B-45, I-29, N-45, G-56, O-68, B-1, I-19, N-43, G-50, O-72, B-11, I-25, the free space, G-49, O-17, B-9, I-23, N-31, G-58, O-63, and then B-4, I-27, N-42, G-54, and O-71."

Goldrich threw up his hands and grinned at the lady. "Well, sweetheart, looks like you've got yourself a Bingo! That means you win tonight's jackpot, three-hundred-and-fifty bucks! All yours." The lady gasped and the entire room applauded. Goldrich gave one final solar grin to the crowd and leaned into the mic. "All right folks, looks like that's the game. Hope you all had a fun night. See you all next Tuesday."

Mike looked at El, who had already leaned over to look at his card before sighing and looking back up at him with a sympathetic smile. "Better luck next time," she shrugged.

"Yeah, better luck next time."

After they'd gathered their tokens and turned in their boards, the two

of them walked back to Mike's car.

"Hey El."

"Mm-hm?"

He swallowed the urge to burst out laughing right there in the parking lot, remembering the way Goldrich's eyes had started to bug out of his head when he dropped the fifth ball.

"Why'd you do that in there?"

El glanced at him out the corner of her eye before shrugging.

"You weren't having a good time."

This time, Mike did laugh, short and quiet. "You did all that so I'd have a good time? You had that guy think he was going crazy."

A smile quirked El's lips and her eyes crinkled mischievously at the corners.

"Every ball he pulled out didn't match your card."

Mike gasped dramatically and nudged El in the arm. "El, that's cheating!"

She gave him a withering look. "Well, it didn't work, so no it wasn't."

Mike rolled his eyes. "That doesn't count."

"Yes, it does."

"El..."

"I wanted you to have a good time," she said, looking dejected. Mike's mouth fell open.

"I did have a good time! I was with you!"

El smiled at that and his heart swelled.

They walked along in silence, listening to the chatter of other Bingo

players walking back to their cars. He heard singing and traced it to a group with crazy hats crowded around a minivan. The jackpot group. He nudged El in the arm and pointed his chin at them. Her eyes lit up, a delighted smile spread across her face, and his heart felt like it would explode.

"Did you want to go next week?" he suddenly asked. El stopped, looking at him curiously. *He* would have been looking at himself like he had lobsters crawling out his ears. But it was El, so of course, she didn't.

"You want to go again?" she asked.

Mike shrugged. "Yeah."

El squinted suspiciously at him, but her expression quickly melted into a smile. "Okay. Next week. 7:00."

"7:00," Mike nodded.

They made it to his car and he opened the passenger side door so El could slide inside. "Just one thing," he said as she pulled the seatbelt across her chest.

"What?"

He grinned. "No cheating next time." He shut the door, muffling her outraged cry, and earning himself the softest punch in the arm when he climbed into the driver's seat.

As they made their slow way out of the parking lot, jammed with grandmas whose only practice driving nowadays was for church or Bingo Night, El said, "I'm glad you came with me tonight, Mike."

Mike's hand was drumming impatiently on the steering wheel, but it stopped when he turned and saw her smile.

"Me too," he said.

And he meant it.

No bluffing.